

State opens Bennington offices

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By Stephen Seitz Herald Staff

BENNINGTON — Gov. James Douglas opened the Department of Health's new office building in downtown Bennington on Monday afternoon.

"This is certainly a transformation from the building the state bought five years ago," said Douglas. "(Community College of Vermont) was using the front of the building, but at the back it was bare brick walls, a few scraggly trees and no roof." CCV still is a tenant.

Another feature of the building at 324 Main St. is that it was redesigned with an eye toward environmental friendliness and energy efficiency, with the nonprofit organization Efficiency Vermont providing technical advice and assistance. The building is heated and cooled by a geothermal system that draws water from several wells, heats or cools it depending on what is needed, and then discharges the water into a nearby brook. The brook is monitored to ensure the building doesn't affect temperature too much.

"It's not much of a difference," said Dave Burley, the project's director of engineering, "ten degrees or less."

The building was acquired in 2001 to provide more space for CCV and to alleviate crowding at the state's office complex on Veterans Memorial Drive. Originally, it was built in 1921 as an auto dealership and garage, and in 1998 the front two-story area was converted into office space. The back was allowed to deteriorate to the point where trees were growing in what is now the Department of Health's office space.

The renovation cost about \$4 million, according to state officials.

Project Manager Stephen M. Frye, of the Waitsfield-based William Maclay Architects & Planners firm, said the project had its share of challenges.

"The building was in horrible shape," he said. "It was falling down and trees were growing in it, and it was an historic site, as well. We worked with the Division of Historic Preservation to make sure that whatever renovation we did complied with historic preservation standards."

Douglas said another goal was to bring more people back to the downtown area.

"Having a state office downtown makes a difference to the bagel shops, the pizza parlors and the retail stores," he said.

State Sen. Richard Sears, D-Bennington, agreed.

"We wanted to bring jobs downtown in order to bring people downtown," he said. "Another benefit for the town is that we've taken a dilapidated building and converted it into a building the community can be pleased with."

Of course, he said later, there are consequences: "Our next challenge is going to be parking." "But it's so great to have this downtown and to keep the community college here. Maybe we can even get some retail in the front."

Buildings and General Services Commissioner R. Tasha Wallis said other state buildings will be adapted for geothermal energy, and that promoting downtown revitalization is one of the state's goals.

"Whenever possible, we try to locate in downtown," she said. "Our next project is putting the Veterans Home in Bennington on a geothermal system. That's just getting started. So far, we've just replaced a couple of boilers. It'll take several years. Bennington is uniquely poised for geothermal energy because it's practically sitting on an underground lake."

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